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ABSTRACT

The goal of instruction in mainstream dialect (MD) acquisition should be to expand students' oral communication skills to include skills needed for academic and economic success, thereby making alternate dialect speakers bidialectic. This implies recognizing students' home dialect as a valid linguistic system and a part of their identity. Although seldom used in classrooms, an "indirect" approach to MD instruction is advocated by most language arts experts. In this method no explicit instruction in dialect differences is given but students are exposed to models of the dominant dialect. A more direct and consequently more effective approach consists of both formal instruction in dialect differences and exercises in using the MD. This approach (1) is less confusing to alternate dialect speakers, (2) provides more opportunities to use the MD, (3) increases student motivation, and (4) helps to discourage use of the "correction" method. Such instructon should begin in preschool and early elementary grades, since the sooner students begin to speak the MD, the more comfortable they will be with it and the more likely they will be able to code switch. The early instruction is also more effective because young children still enjoy playing with language and sounds and are more willing to risk sounding strange when they use new language patterns. (HTH)

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# A POSITION PAPER ON TEACHING THE ACQUISITION OF THE MAINSTREAM DIALECT IN KINDERGARTEN AND ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

by

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Introductory note: In this paper I have not used the almost universally accepted labels "standard English" and "nonstandard English." Instead I prefer to use the terms "mainstream dialect" (MD) and "alternate dialect" (AD).[1] I believe the terms "standard" and "nonstandard" carry negative and incorrect connotations. I also believe the term "dialect" is preferable to "English" because it calls attention to the fact that we all speak a dialect, that is a variety of American English. "Mainstream dialect" and "alternate dialect" are more accurate and less value-laden terms than "standard" and "nonstandard English." The term "standard English" implies to me that there is a correct form of English and any deviations are inferior. This is not so. Dialects considered nonstandard are equally as consistent, rule-governed, and complex as the standard. Linguistic research clearly establishes that all dialects are valid linguistic systems and that speakers of a dialect use its system with great consistency. One author writes, "To say that any dialect or language is inferior is to be linguistically ignorant of language."[2] Alternate dialects are not "nonstandard." They are just structurally different in systematic ways from what is labeled "standard English." These alternate dialects are not the dialect of the majority of educated native speakers. Thus mainstream dialect is defined as the dialect spoken by the majority of educated native speakers. Alternate dialects include all the other varieties of American English such as Black, Southern, Appalachian, and Boston dialects.

# A POSITION PAPER ON TEACHING THE ACQUISITION OF THE MAINSTREAM DIALECT IN KINDERGARTEN AND ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

A few years ago, I taught a student named Vera in a college public communications course. Like many students I have had through the years, she spoke an alternate dialect, in this case Black Dialect. After several weeks, I judged her to be bright, conscientious, and verbal; yet she was a provisionally-admitted student who had a verbal SAT score of 260 and had ranked 22 out of 83 in her high school class. Even though I believed her to be intelligent and hard-working, I also knew chances were good she would not do well in college. For example, in the public communications course she knew she needed to speak the mainstream dialect for formal presentations, but she was unable to do so. As I worked individually with this student, she told me that this was the first time any teacher had ever discussed with her the particular characteristics of her dialect that were different from the accepted MD and had given her specific instruction in speaking the MD. However, for as long as she could remember, teachers had made her ashamed of her dialect and had corrected her speech. For example, she had been repeatedly told not to say "I had did it yesterday" or "I be doing it now." But she never received any direct instruction. It is also worth noting that Vera had attended public schools where over half the students were black. Certainly all these black students did not speak Black Dialect, but many did. Vera was not the exception.

Vera is not the only student who has ever related this lack of instruction to me. Again, she does not represent an unusual case. Many students who speak varying alternate dialects get through the school system without acquiring an ability to speak the MD. Yet, the educational establishment and society, in general, expect all students to speak and write the MD. Even though this is the expectation and even though the academic, social, and

economic barriers created by lack of this skill are well documented, little emphasis is placed on instruction which would enable all students to acquire competencies in the MD.

This paper will focus on the instruction given in pre-school and elementary. The first years of school are the most important school years in determining children's verbal abilities, so the instruction given here is critical in determining the academic future of children. In this paper, I will discuss the goal of second-dialect instruction, examine recommended and traditional approaches, advocate a particular approach, and explain why instruction in the early grades is advantageous.

## The Goal of Bidialectism

The goal of instruction in MD acquisition should be to give an additional skill to speakers of alternate dialects by making them bidialetic. The goal should never be to "take away" the home dialect of the child. All involved in second-dialect training must realize that the home dialect is a valid linguistic system and a part of the child's identity. A child's language development is rooted in the home dialect, and there are overwhelming negative effects of rejecting this dialect. The negative effects most frequently cited are a lowering of the child's self esteem, hindering continued language development, and creating a "silent" child in the classroom.[3] Thus the goal of second-dialect instruction is to expand the repertoire of oral communication skills for situations beyond the home environment by adding a skill that is needed for academic and economic success. The student can then "switch codes" or "registers" depending on the needs of the communication situation. Instruction in bidialectism should always include the concept of "appropriateness" of language selection.

It should be remembered that the acquisition of the MD dialect is only a small part of needed oral language development, and its instruction must never

impede overall growth in language usage. The goal of instruction in oral language development is to help all children gain facility and confidence in communicating in a variety of situations. Even though mainstream dialect acquisition is important, content is more important than form. Children need to learn to communicate more effectively their ideas to others - they cannot do this if they must always think of the form of expression. Children should feel free to communicate and should want to communicate with others. They will not if they are repeatedly corrected or reprimanded for using "unacceptable" grammar or articulation. Instruction in MD acquisition should complement the overall language development of children by expanding the language skills and by giving children more confidence in their abilities to adapt to various situations and needs.

It should also be pointed out that instruction in MD acquisition does not deal with an isolated skill. Lack of this skill affects the child's ability to do well in other critical areas - particularly reading and writing. The following statements by experts in reading, writing, and linguistics illustrate the importance of MD acquisition to over-all academic success.

> ... Reading and writing both have their basis in talk, and ways of using language for writing and in reading must first be established through talk.[4]

> If a child's written composition is poor, the teacher probably needs to help him work on his oral language. Usually a child will not write better than he talks. Whether the aim is effective reading or writing, the factor of spoken language skills sets the child's ceiling of performance.[5]

> ... The child who speaks a nonstandard variety must learn the language of the reading materials at the same time—and this is a language variety which matches his spoken language very poorly. The match between spoken and written language is very important, because spoken language is primary and writing is derived from it ... In learning to read, a student is really learning to see his speech on the printed page. To the degree that his speech is not represented on the pages of the material being used to teach him to read, an obstacle is being raised for him.[6]

Thus, the goal of instruction in MD acquisition is to remove this obstacle and

allow the student who speaks an alternate dialect to participate on an equal footing in the academic process.

## Instructional Approaches

To explain the instructional approaches that I would recommend be used to achieve the goal of bidialectism, it is helpful to examine:

(1) what approach is being advocated by language arts specialists and other writers in the field and

(2) what approach is actually used in most classrooms.

Many, if not most, language arts and communication textbooks used in teacher training do inform the readers that alternate dialects are not inferior in any way to the accepted mainstream dialect.[7] Most of the authors of such books caution teachers to respect the native dialect of the child and mention consequences of degrading the home dialect. Even though most point out that the acquisition of the MD should be a teaching objective, some authors discuss no instructional methods for meeting this objective. The textbook authors who do include a discussion of methodologies generally advocate an intuitive or indirect approach of language enrichment and modeling. The following excerpts illustrate this view.

> ... If an effort is made to accept and understand differences, the children will gradually learn the method of the communication in the community in which they are now functioning.[8]

> ... Children add new speaking styles to their range as they interact with new people in new types of settings. The answer then, (to the question of whether to teach MD) is to increase every child's opportunities for diverse meaningful social interaction.[9]

> ... If the classroom contains an ethnic mix of students, there will be ample models to aid learning of many kinds of usage patterns, and little special instruction will be needed.[10]

Thus what I am labeling the "indirect approach" is one that is based on accepting the child's home dialect and providing a language - rich environment and models of the target dialect. The linguists Shuy and Fasold write that this approach

is based on the belief that "... a frontal attack will alienate nonstandard speakers from education, and that indirection is likely to work better than a head-on attack since their language will change of itself as they are introduced to a wider and wider world."[11]

With this approach no explicit instruction in dialect differences would be given, but teachers would be encouraged, for example, to use children's literature selections which would expose students to certain patterns in the MD. Students would hear, read, and repeat these selections. Teachers would provide a model of the dominant dialect so that children would have opportunities to hear the differences in the dialects. For example if a child says, "Dat man done brung it," the teacher would say, "Yes, the man brought it." Thus by accepting the AD and by exposing students to the dominant dialect, it is believed they will develop an intuitive sense of the patterns of the target dialect.

Of course, whether this recommended approach is generally implemented in the classroom is another matter. Indeed, my own observation, as well as the observation and research of numerous writers in the field,[12] indicate that an antithetical approach is used and that traditionally teachers have treated alternate dialects as inferior ones that need to be eradicated. The standard method of accomplishing this abolition is correction - telling children not to talk that way. I believe the teachers are well-meaning and reject the alternate dialect because they realize the consequences of not speaking the MD. They genuinely are trying to help children, and it goes against their "sense of mission" to do nothing when a child says, "He be sick" or "She give him a whuppin." Unfortunately, teachers are not as familiar with the negative consequences of their telling children that what comes naturally to them is wrong. So students are frequently corrected, but very little formal instruction in actually speaking the MD is given. In essence, this approach is designed to

destroy something that is important to a person's own being and then not give anything back. Clearly this approach is harmful to the child's self concept and continued language development, but it is also clearly ineffective in teaching children to speak the MD.[13]

Only a few educators have suggested that instruction should be direct instead of indirect.[14] The direct approach consists of formal language instruction in dialect differences and exercises specifically designed to provide practice in using the MD. I agree with this approach and believe that it would be more effective in giving alternate dialects the respect they deserve and in teaching the acquisition of the MD. Although the reasons for the indirect approach are laudable, it is my opinion that it does not provide enough direction and instruction for a large number of students. Many students do not intuitively learn to code-switch. As explained below, I believe the direct approach would be more effective because it would:

(1) be less confusing to AD speakers;

(2) provide students more opportunities to use the MD;

(3) increase student motivation; and

(4) help to discourage the use of the "correction" method.

First, I believe the direct approach would be more effective because it would be less confusing to the students. For example, when using an indirect approach to teach children to hear and use possessive forms which do not occur in some alternate dialects, selected poems and jingles containing these possessive patterns would be read and recited by children. Yet the teacher would not explain that in the home dialect one would say, "a dog bone," and in the MD one would say, "a dog's bone." With the direct approach, the same stories and jingles could be used, but an explanation of the differences in the dialect patterns would be given. I am in no way suggesting that grammar lessons replete with labels such as "conjugation" and "person-number agreement"

and with rote-learning drills be included. But by providing the children a focus and a knowledge of areas of differences in the dialects, more carry-over and less confusion would seem likely. Without this instruction, many AD speakers might not hear the difference in the two dialect patterns, and those that do might be confused. What goes through children's minds when they recognize that they are being asked by their teachers to repeat a language pattern different from their indigenous dialect. They are being asked to talk and read in ways that violate their intuitive sense of how language is supposed to sound. A character in the Pultizer-prize winning novel The Color Purple said she was being asked to talk in a "... way that feel peculiar to your mind."[15] Without direct instruction, it seems more probable that children would be baffled and frustrated. It also seems more likely that they would lose self-confidence, develop resentment, and/or develop a feeling that their language is inferior.

Second, I believe a direct approach would be more effective because students would be given more opportunities to practice using the newly-learned patterns. Research reveals that people learn new language characteristics by actually using those characteristics.[16] Listening to and reciting particular patterns are not enough to achieve true understanding and transferability. Students must have the opportunities to use the target patterns in realistic and spontaneous situations. Role playing and code switching activities using meaningful and relevant content need to be provided. Direct instruction would provide the students more opportunities to practice and to experiement with language than indirect instruction would.

The third reason I support direct instruction is that I believe it will increase students' motivation to acquire the MD. Many researchers have indicated that motivation is the key to second dialect acquisition.[17] With the direct bidialectic approach, students would know that they are not being asked

to abandon their native dialect and should be more willing and less resentful of learning another dialect. Students would be told "everyone talks in a dialect" and "one is no more correct than another." Some writers have suggested this be explained in terms of "school talk" and "home" or "other talk." The direct approach also mandates a forthright discussion of the reasons for acquiring a second dialect. I believe this open and "up-front" discussion with children who may have little contact with other reference groups should increase their motivation to become speakers of the new dialect.

A fourth reason for advocating a direct instructional approach is that I believe it would help to discourage the common counterproductive "correction" method by providing teachers a more structured avenue to help students acquire the MD. Unlike the indirect approach, the direct provides a visible concrete instructional strategy. With the direct, teachers would have to be provided with much curriculum material developed by specialists which would inform or remind them of the legitimacy and importance of the home dialect and at the same time provide tangible ways to help the child acquire the MD. Of course, the direct approach will not change all teachers attitudes or instructional methods, but if teachers are presented with well-prepared instructional material, I think change is much more likely to occur. I believe the overwhelming majority of teachers genuinely care for their students' welfare and use the correction method aimed at eradication of the home dialect because they do not have a knowledge of the linguistic validity of ADs and because no other structured method for teaching MD acquisition is available to them.

With the direct instructional approach, MD acquisition would be taught at a set time in the school day. I believe this will also help to discourage the use of the correction method. During MD instruction, students would be expected to and be given numerous opportunities to speak the MD. At other times in the classroom, children should not be corrected or penalized if they use the AD.

The linguist Joan Baratz cites an incident she observed which illustrates the problem of mixing instruction in MD acquisition with instruction in other subject matters and the harms of using the "correction" method. Baratz writes:

> I remember being in a third grade class that was discussing the Revolutionary War. The teacher asked "Who crossed the Delaware River with troops? A young Negro boy responded "Dat George Washington" to which the teacher replied "No, that was George Washington." With such a correction the class, I am sure, was confused as to the right answer and the boy learned not to volunteer information again![18]

At some point in late elementary school when children possess competencies in the MD, the use of this dialect should then be actively encouraged at other times in the classroom so that students will have more opportunities to become fluent and comfortable using the MD.

## Early Instruction

In addition to being direct, I also believe this instruction should be given early in children's formal education. Some have suggested that MD instruction be deferred until high school when students can decide if they wish to speak the MD,[19] but by then I strongly believe that too much harm is already done and it may be too late for many students. Instead I recommend that MD acquisition be taught in pre-school and early elementary. There is evidence to indicate that young children have the abilities to be functional bidialectics and to profit from direct instruction.[20] Without doubt the early years are the most important ones in language development, and, as Adler has written, they "allow for the rapid growth of oral language skills."[21] Since language is also a habit, the sooner students begin to speak the MD, the more comfortable they will be with it and the more likely they will be able to code switch. Once the students possess the ability to speak two dialects, then they will truly have a linguistic choice.

Another reason I believe instruction in MD acquisition should be given early is that the environment in the early elementary grades should be more

conducive to learning a new dialect. Students at this age enjoy playing with language and sounds, and they are more willing to try new activities and to risk sounding strange when they use new language patterns. As they get older, the peer pressure gets greater, and I believe fewer students are likely to risk trying out language patterns that sound unnatural to them. Acquisition of a second-dialect requires risk taking: risking making mistakes and risking sounding funny to one's classmates and one's self. Students in pre-school and elementary are more likely to take such risks.

## Implementation

Exactly when to introduce instruction in MD acquisition in the kindergarten and early elementary curricula and exactly what to include in the instructional materials should be decided locally and is beyond the scope of this paper. Obviously the need for such a program varies drastically throughout the country, and not all schools have a need for such a program. But when alternate dialects exist within a community, I recommend that a specialist who has a thorough knowledge of the students' alternate dialects:

(1) prepare or select appropriate curricula materials[29] and

(2) train pre-school and elementary teachers in using the direct instructional approach and the curricula material.

For instruction to be successful, teachers must understand the importance of the native dialect and know significant differences in the students' AD and in the MD. Teachers would definitely have to be provided specific instructional materials based on the grammatical, phonological, and lexical differences in the AD and in the MD.

## Conclusion

If teachers recognize that dialect differences are inherent in language, that ADs are not incorrect attempts to speak the MD, and are provided with

tangible ways to help children acquire the MD, then students like Vera will not grow up ashamed of their native dialect and unable to speak another. Schools have a responsibility to provide students the skills they need to participate fully in society. As long as dialect training is ignored in the schools, then the schools are failing to assume this responsiblity.

As speech communication professionals, we have a responsiblity to respect alternate dialects and, at the same time, to help AD speakers acquire the MD. I also believe we have a responsibility to help change the prevailing attitude that alternate dialects are inferior and a responsiblity to encourage the schools to include dialect training.

## Endnotes

[1]I wish to thank Dr. Elizabeth Bell, a colleague at the University of South Carolina at Aiken, for her help in selecting the terms "alternate" and "mainstream."

[2]Arnold Cheyney, Teaching Children of Different Cultures in the Classroom: A Language Approach (Columbus, Ohio: Charles Merrill, 1976), 58.

[3]For example see: R.R. Allen and Kenneth Brown, ed., Developing Communication Competence in Children (Skokie, Illinois: National Textbook Company, 1976), 50; Nicholas Anastasiow, Oral Language: Expression of Thought (Urbana, Illinois: ERIC, 1979), 26; Gertrude Corcoran, Language Experience for Nursery and Kindergarten Years (Itasca, Illinois: Peacock Publishers, 1976) 90-94; Terry Meier and Courtney Cazden, "Research Update: A Focus on Oral Language and Writing from a Multicultural Perspective," Language Arts, 59 (May, 1982), 504-512; Mary Louise Willbrand and Richard Rieke, Teaching Oral Communication in Elementary School (New York: Macmillan, 1983), 19.

[4]J. Tough, Talking and Learning: A Guide to Fostering Communication Skills in Nursery and Infant Schools (London: Ward Lork Educational Publishers, 1977), 7.

[5]S.W. Lundsteen, Children Learn to Communicate: Language Arts through Creative Problem Solving (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 112.

[6]Walt Wolfram and Ralph Fasold, The Study of Social Dialects in American English (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1974), 183.

[7]For example see: Anastasiow, 25-31; Paul Burns, Assessment and Correction of Language Arts Difficulties (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1980) 135-136; Mini Chenfield, Teaching Language Arts Creatively (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) 81; Dorris M. Lee and Joseph B. Rubin, Children and Language (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1979), 114-133; Robert Hopper and Rita Naremore, Children's Speech: A Practical Introduction to Communication Development (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 125; Judith Wells Lindfors, Children's Language and Learning (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980) 388; Hilda Meirs, Helping our Children Talk (New York: Longman, 1978), 135; Iris Tiedt and Sidney Tiedt, Contemporary English in the Elementary School (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 76-77.

[8]Willbrand and Rieke, 20.

[9]Lindsfors, 388.

[10]Hopper and Naremore, 125.

[11]Ralph Fasold and Roger Shuy, eds, Teaching Standard English in the Inner City (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1970) xiii.

[12]For example see: Sol Adler, Poverty Children and Their Language (New York: Grune and Stratton, 1979) 124-125; Jesse L. Colquit, "The Student's Right to His Own Language: A Viable Model or Empty Rhetoric," Communication Quarterly, 25 (Fall, 1977), 17-20; Corcoran, 99; Grace Holt, "The Ethno - Linguistic Approach to Speech - Language Learning, "The Speech Teacher, 19 (March, 1970), 98; Hopper and Naremore, 117; Kenneth R. Johnson, "Teacher's Attitude Toward the Nonstandard Negro Dialect - Let's Change It," in Language, Society and Education: A Profile of Black English, ed. by Johanna De Stefano (Worthington, Ohio: Charles A. Jones, 1973) 177-188; Meier and Cazden, 504-511; Roger Shuy, "Teacher Training and Urban Language Problems," in Fasold and Shuy, 120-125; Murray Wax, Rosalie Wax, and Robert Dumont, "Formal Education in American Indian Community," Social Problems, (Spring, 1969), 82.

[13]Burns, 136.

[14]For example see: Adler, 124-136; Joan Baratz, "Educational Considerations for Teaching Standard English to Negro Children," in Fasold and Shuy, 20-40; Cheyney, 58-60; Bernice Cullinan; Angela Jaggar, Dorothy Strickland, "Language Expansion for Black Children in the Primary Grades: A Research Report," in Educating the Disadvantaged ed. by Erwin Flaxman (New York: AMS Press, 1976) 196; Roger Shuy, "Social Dialects: Teaching vs. Learning," The Florida FL Reporter: A Journal of Language and Culture in Education, 9 (Spring/Fall, 1971) 30-33.

[15]Alice Walker, The Color Purple (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982), 194.

[16]Robert Hopper and Nancy Wrather, "Teaching Functional Communication Skills in the Elementary Classroom," Communication Education, 27 (November, 1978) 316-321.

[17]For example see: Holt, 98-100; Richard Lee, "Linguistics, Communication, and Behavioral Objectives: A Remedial Curriculum," The Speech Teacher, 20 (January, 1971), 1-9; Wolfram and Fasold, 183.

[18]Baratz, 40.

[19]Allen and Brown, 30; Baratz, 31; Walt Wolfram and Donna Christian, Appalachian Speech (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1976) 147.

[20]Adler, 136-161 and Cullinan, 196.

[21]Adler, 141.

[22]Examples of available and recommended curricula materials are: Adler, 264-291; Irwin Feigenbaum, "The Use of Nonstandard English in Teaching Standard: Contrast and Comparison," in Fasold and Shuy, 87-104; and Gail Tompkins and Lea M. McGee, "Launching Nonstandard Speakers into Standard English," Language Arts, 60 (April, 1983), 463-468.